

## Signs of Change S Viswanathan

About the author

S. Viswanathan (1939-2019)



- Social activist, journalist, editor
- Born in Sri Lanka
- Masters in Economics
- In 1961 joined The Indian Express as sub editor
- In 1993 joined The Hindu as a special correspondent
- Articles on the conditions of Dalits in rural TN are remarkable
- Remarkable articles on the socio-political conditions in TN
- Book: Dalits in Dravidian Land
- Member of one of the panels of Sahitya Akademy

# Signs of Change

## An Overview

- ▶ The passage is a commentary on the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment of the Constitution of India.
- ▶ The act provides for **statutory reservation of elected posts for women.**
- ▶ **Issues of the scheduled castes**
- ▶ How caste comes in the way of Dalit empowerment in Tamil Nadu?

## Paragraphs 1

### The Constitution Amendment Act of 1993

- ▶ **The Constitution Amendment Act of 1993** is hailed as a breakthrough in effecting a vibrant system of participatory democracy at the grassroots level and a paradigm shift in the process of development.
- ▶ The act gives guidelines for the states to put in place the three-tier '**Panchayati Raj**' institutions.
- ▶ The act generated a lot of hope about **empowering the weaker sections, especially the rural women and scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.**
- ▶ The act for the first time provided statutory **reservation of elected posts in local bodies for women, besides Scheduled Castes(Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes.**

## Paragraph 2

### Hope and Fears

- ▶ Great expectations as Tamil Nadu Panchayats Acts (1994) passed under the provisions of the Constitution Amendment Act.
- ▶ The state had no elected local bodies for more than a decade.
- ▶ It generated apprehensions that the elections might add to the tensions in the rural TN where Dalits are victims of caste-created violence.
- ▶ **Hindu fundamentalist leaders raised questions** and challenged the reservations of seats for Dalits in local bodies.

## Paragraph 3

### The consequences

- ▶ In the elections of 1996, Dalits were prevented from filing nominations in several villages where reservations were to be effected.
- ▶ In five villages elections could not be held for the full five-year term from 1996 to 2001.
- ▶ Elections were held in two panchayats in 2002.
- ▶ But the elected Presidents resigned within days of assuming charge under pressure from caste- Hindus

## Other tortures on the Dalits

- ▶ Many women Panchayat presidents suffered humiliation at the hands of caste Hindus
- ▶ Caste Hindus made many Dalits as proxies for them
- ▶ In 1997 six Dalits were executed
- ▶ Hindus who were sympathetic to the Dalits were also tortured.

## Uphill task for the elected Dalits

- ▶ Fear of facing the hostile people
- ▶ Fear of convening meetings
- ▶ Police and higher officials' apathy
- ▶ Consolation:
- ▶ Some departments of state and central governments supported the Dalits
- ▶ Aid from NGOs
- ▶ Training programmes and workshops arranged by supporters.
- ▶ **The consistent help from left parties**

## Dalit empowerment gains momentum

- ▶ After two elections, the ground situations with regard to the empowerment of Dalits and women seemed to change for the better.
- ▶ The condition in southern districts like Thirunelveli and Madurai, which were epicentres of caste-based atrocities seemed to improve.
- ▶ Perceptible level of improvement in women and Dalit assertion.
- ▶ They became more aware of their rights and responsibilities.



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- ▶ Caste Hindus slowly realized the need to change their mindset towards Dalits and women.
- ▶ Encouraging response from the revenue administration despite the delayed assistance from the state and central governments
- ▶ Complaints of officials' indifference towards Dalits and women are fewer.
- ▶ Yet the non Dalit consolidation was evident at certain places.
- ▶ When some Dalit leaders had to run for life others had considerable support from well-wishers.

## Mixed Response

- ▶ Angry caste Hindus interrupted the polls of 1996.
- ▶ Some Dalit leaders had to go underground.
- ▶ Some caste Hindus approved of the elected Dalits for the state assistance in such panchayats.
- ▶ “We do not want our villages to be left behind in development”, some caste Hindus said.
- ▶ Support of AIDMK to some Dalits
- ▶ Many Dalit leaders suffered while confronting poachers, sand mining mafia and liquor barons and some were remarkably successful in such encounters.

# More instances of Difficulties Dalit leaders faced

## The case of Parvati

- ▶ K. Parvati, a Dalit Panchayat President, who got elected for a second spell had to confront hostility from an influential vice-president from the dominant Marava community.
- ▶ Members prevented her from conducting council meetings.
- ▶ She had to seek police aid to evict outsiders; convened public meeting; and explained to the general public her difficulties.
- ▶ “If I could get elected, it was because I moved with everyone, irrespective of caste and community...”, she said.
- ▶ Her experience as a social worker as a social uplift worker proved useful in discharging her duties as Panchayat President.
- ▶ Her own Dalit community did not stand by her in the 2001 elections.
- ▶ She made every Dalit of her zone independent, they no more had to depend on others for basic needs.

# The case of Chellappan

- ▶ Chellappan was a Dalit Panchayat president who got elected from Thadianpatti Village in Tirunelveli.
- ▶ He attributed his success to the fact that he always considered Dalits and non- Dalits equally and worked hard for their welfare.
- ▶ Dalits alleged that all benefits were reserved by him for the non-Dalits and the minority Dalit sect to which the president belonged.
- ▶ They claimed that Chellappan was under the control of Caste Hindus.

## Conclusion

- ▶ No Dalit can win without the support of at least a section of the non-Dalits.
- ▶ When Dalits come to power difference of opinion is likely from among themselves.
- ▶ Some are cold-shouldered and some face humiliation.
- ▶ In several places caste- Hindus take advantage of the chaos.
- ▶ “This, however, is only a passing phase. Dalits will soon realize that their strength lies in their unity”, observes a Dalit activist.